Changing Patterns in School Curriculum and Organization

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EVERYONE PLANS. In education we plan for tomorrow's lesson, for next week's event, for next year's program. We prepare the budget, the book order and the supply requisition. We envisage that additional staff member and project our thinking to encompass the redirected thrust which the new equipment will make. Implicit in these processes is a concept of the future, be it immediate or long range, and in this era of change in people, institutions, social patterns and technology, the educational planner has need for perception, sensitivity and penetrating foresight.

Let me enter here a vigorous disclaimer of any presumption to expertise in the art of prophecy. As a soothsayer my credibility exceeds only slightly that of those who held great expectations for the Edsel. You will understand, then, the trepidation which I felt recently in coordinating the efforts of specialists in the several disciplines in providing an architect with educational specifications for a new secondary school building. If we project a fifty year period of utilization of a school facility, we are immediately propelled into speculation on matters of curriculum and organization for the twenty-first century. What will it be like? To whom do we go for counsel? Shall we draw upon the images of Orwell and Huxley for our concept of the future? Will the emerging patterns in education reflect the views of Rafferty, Conant, Trump or some other point along an assumed continuum of educational thought? After making appropriate allowance for the earlier demurrer, note that this barometer reads change. The knell has sounded for some of the traditional systems of organization, and while the reverberations may linger for some time, by the standards to which we are accustomed, the changes will be significant, and even dramatic.

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The restiveness which has been so apparent in schools and colleges, and indeed in society at large, has been attributed in large measure to issues involving the individual and his identity in a largely urban society. Much of the anxiety which young people express about their lives arises out of what they see as the anonymity, conformity and impersonalization of a culture geared to technology, cybernetics, automation, and the mass rather than the individual. They see, or think they see, these developments as rampant determinants rather than servants of humanity. Although educators have greater faith in mankind than this view would connote, we can understand their fear and respect their concern for the uniqueness of the individual.

For years articulators of educational theory and philosophy have made obeisance to the importance of the individual. The literature of the middle decades of our century is replete with such references. These were often prelude to a particular curricular disposition with a subject matter emphasis. Movements such as that in child study, however, blossomed in this period and were continuations and redirections of the atmosphere that had its origin in John Dewey's outlook. The work of contemporary theorists, researchers and teachers adds impetus to the new focus on personal fulfillment and self-realization as priority objectives for education. Manifestations of this trend are found in nongraded school organization plans in both elementary and secondary schools; in the stress which is being put upon independent study, discovery approaches, and individually programmed teaching machines; in school schedules incorporating time modules; and in team teaching systems, to cite just a few innovations. Let us take a look, albeit superficial, at some of those which are beginning to have a general effect upon American education.

Proponents of rapid and radical change in established educational patterns, often with facile fluency, hold immediate and great promise for restructured school organization incorporating the latest in media and technology. Those who hold that the advent of the computer and the TV screen heralds the dehumanizing mechanization of the learning process have little to fear, however. In the more than a decade that educational television (ETV) has been a viable prospect, and despite evidence that has been amassed to support the conclusion that television deserves a place among the educational media, Murphy and Gross conclude that "televised teaching is still in a rudimentary stage of development. . . . TV is still far from fulfilling its obvious promise." [1]

This not especially startling observation may be subject to revision

in the foreseeable future. While not yet commonplace, it is no longer a rarity to meet the school district media specialist who has a staff among whom are authorities in ETV. States and larger subdivisions are committing themselves increasingly to the idea that television can bring to education resources and programs which are not available through other means. The tube is on its way to becoming as ubiquitous in the classroom as it is in the home, and objectors are finding the prospect less threatening to their jobs or to their values as it becomes apparent that television is a means of communication not unlike the motion picture film or, in a sense, the book.

Some of the more visionary practitioners of the profession project the marriage of the computer and the television set in a retrieval system. Technologically such an arrangement is quite possible, but the cultural lag for which education is so noted will preclude an early application of it. The immense costs involved in its widespread utilization are enough to numb the average fiscal officer, and even the Federal eagle may falter were computer assisted instruction and retrieval systems including tapes and films undertaken on a national scale.

Team teaching, that blanket label which encompasses a wide variety of systems of cooperative effort on the part of a school staff, has achieved a position of respectability among patterns of educational organization over the past decade. Disciples attribute advantages to it in the areas of in-service training of teachers, improved planning resulting from group activity, effectiveness of staff utilization, and flexibility of both grouping and program.

Most team teaching plans incorporate large group instruction, small group seminars, and independent study into the student's weekly schedule. Major presentations occur in class combinations numbering 75 to 150 or more students. The small groups react to presentations and discuss their implications. These sessions often set the stage for the independent study activities in which a student spends a significant portion of his time. The composition of groups is regularly restructured under most plans in order to meet the changing needs and circumstances which develop.

A common organization for team teaching establishes a hierarchal structure of professional and para-professional personnel. A team leader or master teacher frequently coordinates the efforts of the faculty membership on the team. Other members include regular teachers, teacher interns, aides and clerical assistants. Imperative to the success of any team is the opportunity to engage in joint planning

on a regular basis. It is here that ideas are broached, analyzed, and decided upon. Team members are then allocated to the various functions in accordance with their special talents and interests.

There is an obvious benefit in the cooperative planning process for the new teacher. Inherent, too, is the prospect for the refinement of techniques by experienced teachers through exposure to the daily activities of their colleagues. Often the team leader provides the kind of regular supervision which is unavailable in more traditional systems of organization.

In summarizing an assessment of team teaching Bair and Woodward [2] reach the conclusion that while such an organization is no panacea for many of the problems which confront schools, it does provide an opportunity for identifying, studying and determining approaches to them. Although acknowledging that all teachers are not likely to be comfortable in such an arrangement, their surveys suggest a highly positive response from pupils and parents as well as professionals.

Nongraded or crossgraded school organizations are frequently a concomitant of team teaching. While each can exist independent of the other, many have concluded that they are complementary, and we often find elements of both in innovative patterns. It is the potential, indeed the very need, for frequent realignment of groups of students which is the common feature of these plans.

Proponents of nongrading contend that it is the logical extension of the readily acknowledged principle that individuals progress toward the realization of their potentials at varying rates. The graded school, they are convinced, does violence to what we have learned about human growth and development. The student who enjoys reading and whose progress in that area is well beyond the norm for his age is not required to mark time under a nongraded arrangement. The same student, who may grasp mathematical abstractions more slowly, need not be confronted with the daily frustrations implicit in membership in a graded class whose functional level is more advanced than is his.

Goodlad and Anderson [3] espouse the nongraded structure on the grounds that it permits continuous progress in the several subjects based upon each child's level of achievement and current learning rate in each field at a given time. They believe that the teacher's freedom of action is broadened by eliminating concern over possible encroachment on the work and materials of another grade. Of major importance is that fundamental to a nongraded pattern of organiza-

tion is the elimination of failure and the traumatic experience of repeating a grade.

B. Frank Brown [4] cites fellow iconoclasts as responsible for terming the prevalent graded structure of the secondary schools as "a cage for every age." He emphatically asserts that the nongraded high school is a viable approach for both the slow learner and for the academically able student; that the flexibility of grouping inherent in nongrading encourages program reforms, greater individualization of instruction, and improved attitudes toward school. Many educators believe that Dr. Brown's imaginative approaches to the organization of Melbourne High School have set the pace and direction for secondary education.

It is educationally indefensible, according to Stanford's Bush and Allen,[5] to require that all students take a given subject, mathematics for example, for fifty minutes in a class of thirty every day over the period of their high school years. They offer a carefully conceived and detailed plan for breaking away from traditional organizational plans based upon the rigidities of the Carnegie unit. In their proposal, time, heretofore an unvariable, is arranged in modules, groups of which are allocated as the need exists. It may be decided by a faculty that a particular program warrants two twenty minute mods per day, and another subject three or four. The number of mods assigned may vary from day to day so that a group might meet for only a few minutes on Monday, but for an extended period on Tuesday. Again we see flexibility as the objective of the restructured operational plan.

Although it is an organizational change which falls in a somewhat different plane than do nongraded or team teaching plans, the movement to the middle school has gained impressive impetus in recent years. Many of the middle schools incorporate aspects of other novel and imaginative approaches in their internal structures.

The junior high school as originally conceived was intended to be a transitional school providing for that period of development between childhood and adolescence. Since the beginning of the second quarter of this century, the 6-3-3 plan, including a three year junior high school between elementary and high school, has been the most prevalent pattern of school system organization. Recent evidence regarding psycho-social and biological maturational rates suggests that the ninth grade might more appropriately be associated with the high school, and that preadolescents could benefit from a program offering

greater variety and specialization than is available in the usual elementary school pattern.

Alexander and his associates [6] make the judgment that the junior high school in its present form is focused primarily on the adolescent. They hold that an apparent need exists to develop a program which is especially adapted to the needs of pupils from late childhood through early adolescence, and that the middle school rather than a revitalized junior high school is the vehicle to accomplish this.

More than a thousand middle schools are now functioning and the movement in this direction continues unabated. While a variety of grade levels are often included in the middle school, grades five or six through eight are most common. In seeking to provide for the wide range of differences which exist in children between the ages of ten and thirteen years, advocates of the middle school are attempting to develop an institution having its own unique characteristics rather than a pale carbon of the high school.

We can take encouragement from the observation that unique and creative programs and pilot projects are being implemented or experimented with all over the land. It is heartening to note that offerings in computer programming are making inroads on solid geometry; that family life and sex education courses appear in the subject listings of the schools almost as often as does ancient history. The winds of change have even swayed the schools, no mean accomplishment, and a fresh vigor can be detected. It becomes increasingly rare to find a school which is not trying a new curricular or organizational approach. The thrust is toward tomorrow and the quest is for a better way for the future. Although fraught with the possibility for error, and not nearly as comfortable as doing things in the traditional manner, the challenge, excitement and prospect for improved learning impel us toward new patterns.

References

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